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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DUBAI 002598

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SUBJECT: UNODC OFFICIAL DISCUSSES DRUGS, POLITICS IN IRAN

REF: A. DUBAI 1452; B. DUBAI 528; C. 5089

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CLASSIFIED BY: Jason L Davis, Consul General, Dubai, UAE.
REASON: 1.4 (d)

1.(C) Summary: Tehran-based representative of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Roberto Arbitrio recently discussed with PolEconChief the work of UNODC in Iran and various aspects of the drug problem in Iran. UNODC's Tehran office is involved in projects related to all aspects of the drug problem, including supply and demand reduction, judicial reform, and police training, as well as human trafficking. Arbitrio also discussed his own assessment of the political situation in Iran since President Ahmadinejad took office. He also said reputable sources had told him Iran recently gave Iraqi radical cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr 50 million USD. End summary

2.(C) In an April 6 meeting -- which included UNODC staff, UNVIE Deputy Pol/Econ Counselor, and PolEconChief -- Italian UNODC Iran Field Representative Roberto Arbitrio (please protect) discussed UNODC's operations in Iran. Its three strategic objectives are to assist the government in reducing trafficking in narcotics into, within, and outside the country; to contribute to the development of effective prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation measures in drug abuse and HIV/AIDS; and to promote the rule of law through strengthened crime prevention measures and the provision of legal assistance, including in the areas of crime prevention, anti-corruption, and human trafficking. (Note: This cable focuses primarily on Arbitrio's assessment of the drug situation; full UNODC documentation of its programs in Iran is being sent by pouch to INL. End note)

Supply Reduction

3.(C) Anti-narcotic forces monitor Iran's borders, particularly the borders with Afghanistan and Pakistan. While they are police in name, they operate with more of a military mentality. Arbitrio, who has visited sections of Iran's borders, reports that much of the border is heavily fortified, but that there are problems monitoring mountainous regions. Furthermore, the smugglers are heavily armed and willing to shoot. He said the heads of smuggling groups factor into their operations that a percentage of smugglers will be killed and a percentage of the drugs confiscated. Iranian soldiers die regularly in interdiction efforts, in part because the smugglers often are better armed. Iran raised once with UNODC its wish list of high-tech equipment for drug interdiction operations, such as drones and satellite phones, but now seems to understand UNODC will not play a role in any such acquisitions. (Note: Iran did

not attempt to reintroduce a resolution during the most recent UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs in March 2006 in Vienna that would have facilitated access to remote sensing through UNODC. End note)

4.(C) Most of Iran's interdiction efforts are along the Afghanistan/Pakistan border. This has frustrated Turkey, which has accused Iran of doing little to stop the outflow of drugs into its territory. However, Arbitrio has heard that Iranian-Turkish cooperation is improving. (Note: During the October 2005 Paris Pact meeting in Istanbul, Turkey and Iran were encouraged to increase cross-border law enforcement cooperation. However, Turkish diplomats in Vienna have told UNVIE Poloff that there is still little trust between the two sides. End note]. However, he said, the military forces controlling both sides of the Iran-Iraq border are doing much to stop drug smuggling. Arbitrio reported that there appear to be two routes running through Iraq: one in the north, involving Kurdish smuggling to Turkey; and one in the south through the Basra region and then onward to either Jordan or the Gulf.

5.(C) Arbitrio reported it is clearer who controls the drug trade along the borders than inside the country. Powerful families in Sistan-va Baluchistan control the input into Iran, and, as mentioned, to the west Iranian Kurds are helping onward smuggling into Iraq. There is also evidence of Iranian involvement in the drug trade in Europe, although he could not say if these Iranians were from one particular region or ethnic group. However, he said it is less clear who handles the internal drug trade in Iran.

6.(C) He also noted that most of the refined opium coming into Iran is processed in Afghanistan, not in Iran, although he has heard indications some opium is now being processed after it enters Iraq, in labs in Basra. Arbitrio said that the head of the Iranian Drug Control Headquarters, Fada Hossein Maleki, told him that he believed the Basra route and production facilities were an increasing problem. Arbitrio said that he has seen little evidence of production of synthetic drugs in Iran, but mentioned he had heard of two recent large drug seizures, including one in Mashhad, of ecstasy.

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7.(C) He acknowledged that his sources on drug issues are for the most part the Iranian government, and that the UNODC reports to Iran's Drug Control office. That said, he said he did not see indications of sanctioned government involvement in the drug trade, other than isolated cases of bribery of local officials.

Demand Reduction

8.(C) Arbitrio says the new government wants religion to play a bigger role in addiction treatment and surmises this could be one reason for increased budgets for the bonyads. He thought that one motivating factor for the government to take on the drug program was the fact that reports of high levels of addiction hurt the image it wants to project as a religious, morally superior nation. The government also sees in the issue an area for positive interaction with other countries, particularly given that other countries will suffer from Iranian inactivity against drug traffic.

9.(C) In a discussion of the proposed boot camps to sequester drug users from the general prison population (Ref A), Arbitrio said this government initiative was a response to an order from the president to "do something" about addicts. Drug addiction treatment is mandatory in these boot camps. According to Arbitrio, the Ministry of Health and others opposed the concept, but they downplayed their opposition until the government shifted its attention. There were supposed to be "thousands" of these boot camps, a number then revised to "hundreds," and finally resulting in "dozens" of them.

10.(C) Arbitrio and other foreign representatives have visited

some prisons in Iran. He acknowledged that he cannot speak about conditions for political prisoners there, but said that conditions for the general prison population were much better than what he has seen on prison visits in Central Asian countries.

11.(U) UNODC has a special anti-addiction program in the city of Bam, where drug use has skyrocketed after the 2003 earthquake there.

12.(C) Arbitrio also said that although the Ministry of Health's drug-related statistics are basically reliable, the new government is trying to resurrect 1999 numbers of around a million drug users. Current statistics indicate 4.5 to 6 million drug users.

Rule of Law

13.(C) In the past, the Iranian government claimed that Iran had no problem with organized crime, but it is now starting up an anti-organized crime unit. UNODC is working with the Iranian government to train officers to conduct investigations, as well as training judiciary. It also has a program to work against human trafficking.

Foreign Partners

14.(C) Foreign contributions - which fund the bulk of UNODC programs in Iran - have continued, despite the chill in Iran's international relations. However, UNODC has not received any foreign funding for one project for increased internal drug surveillance at airports, train stations, etc.

15.(C) Arbitrio praised US academic institutions' involvement with drug efforts in Iran, including high-level Iranian officials participating in US university programs (Ref B and C). He also praised the US State Department's annual report on drugs for reflecting Iranian counter-narcotic efforts.

Arbitrio's Assessment of Iranian Politics

16.(C) According to Arbitrio, the Iranian government continues to work with UNODC and overall, has made little change to its drug policies since Ahmadinejad became president. Arbitrio noted that the biggest change impacting him was increased surveillance of his activities. He also noted a degree of crackdown on NGOs accused of acting on behalf of foreign governments.

17.(C) Arbitrio said there was an ongoing power struggle between conservative pragmatists and hard-line conservatives, resulting in mismanagement of the government. He said he had met

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Ahmadinejad at a meeting for foreign ambassadors and multilateral organization representatives, and had concluded the new president is a "true believer" in his religious rhetoric. Ahmadinejad's only message that day to his audience was "bring back monotheism and study the message of the prophets." Arbitrio thinks the supreme leader initially thought he could control Ahmadinejad but has since tried to distance himself from him. Khamenei empowered Rafsanjani (by giving oversight responsibility to the Expediency Council, which Rafsanjani chairs), but Arbitrio said he has seen no follow through action. He said he has heard - anecdotally - that there have been five attempts on the president's life, and that the motivation for these attempts was related to internal power struggles, not ethnic strife. He mentioned separately the recent attack targeting provincial officials in Sistan-va Baluchistan and said he had heard that armed men split the government delegation on the bus into Sunni and Shia and killed the Shia. He questioned the assumption that the perpetrators were drug smugglers, asking why they would deliberately try to stir up trouble in their area

of operation.

18.(C) Arbitrio did not have a high opinion of the intellectual skills of the new government. He mentioned that Supreme Council for National Security Chairman Ali Larijani did not have a "high intellect," and that people he knew from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were not impressed with the rest of the nuclear negotiating team.

19.(C) He is hearing rumors that the new Assembly of Experts, following next November's election, will try to push out Supreme Leader Khamenei. He doubts that Ahmadinejad will be pushed out of the scene, saying he is making full use of his presidential powers but is nonetheless a puppet for the "people in Qom."

20.(C) Finally, Arbitrio said "knowledgeable sources" (presumably governmental officials) told him Iran gave Iraqi radical cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr 50 million USD during Sadr's trip to Iran.

Comment

21.(C) Arbitrio's comments on the drug situation in Iran complements what we are hearing from Iranian medical personnel involved in drug treatment programs (Ref A-C), and Arbitrio seemed to share their pragmatic attitude toward drug policy. It is particularly noteworthy that UNODC has included in its efforts a project on combating human trafficking. Arbitrio's comments on the political situation are useful, as an outsider (an Italian) living in Tehran and working with the Iranian government; however, it is difficult to assess how plugged in he is. He asked to keep in continued contact but said it was not advisable to be in direct communication while he is in Tehran.

22.(U) This message was cleared by UNVIE.
DAVIS